Chapter 4. The Biodiversity of Stokes County

Natural Community Types

A natural community is "a distinct and reoccurring assemblage of populations of plants, animals, bacteria, and fungi naturally associated with each other and their physical environment" (Schafale and Weakley 1990). In most cases, natural communities are at the heart of sites that are considered biologically significant. Although on occasion sites are recognized as significant simply because they contain populations of rare species, most contain examples of one to several community types ranging in quality from fair to excellent. The significance of such sites is often augmented by, but not dependent on, the presence of rare species. The condition and extent of natural community types within a site usually has a strong influence on the overall significance of a site.

At least twenty-two types of exemplary natural communities known to occur in Stokes County are listed in Table 1. Other types are probably present in Stokes County, but have yet to be studied and classified. The rarity or commonness of the community types can be ascertained from the global and state ranks in the table. A question mark in either a global or state rank indicates that the distribution of the community type is not as yet fully known. The Stokes County sites which contain exemplary communities are also provided in the table.

Following Table 1 are descriptions for all of the community types known to occur in Stokes County. With few exceptions, Latin names used in the descriptions are provided for shrub and herb strata only. Both in the Table 1 and in the following descriptions, the community types are arranged in an ecological order that groups together types that are often adjacent in the landscape or that have similar physical structure. For example, Dry-Mesic Oak--Hickory Forest and Mesic Mixed Hardwood Forest often occur adjacent to each other in the landscape and so are adjacent in the table. Piedmont Calcareous Cliffs and Montane Acidic Cliffs are not usually found together, but have roughly similar physical structure. For additional information on these communities and their floristics from a statewide perspective, refer to Schafale and Weakley 1990, Classification of the Natural Communities of North Carolina: Third Approximation.